



## The Apocrypha

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Holy Orthodox Metropolis of Boston

Holy Orthodox Metropolis of Boston  
86 Country Club Road  
Dedham MA 02026-5607  
Visit us at: [www.homb.org](http://www.homb.org)  
781 329-6500

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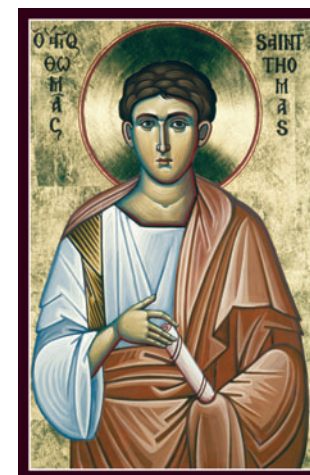




The Evangelist Luke begins his Gospel with a noteworthy remark:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word.

Certain men distorted the teaching of the Faith that the Gospel of St. Luke “set forth in order.” They presented variations of the events or invented their own events, products of their own imagination, fabricating episodes that never really happened. In this way they made their own Gospels, pseudo-gospels, commonly known as the Apocryphal Gospels (from the Greek word for hidden or secret). They intermingled their own doctrines with Christian truths, or gave them “captivating” titles, usually ascribing them to a certain Apostle or Saint. These are called the pseudepigrapha, that is, writings with falsely ascribed authorship. Such are the so-called *Gospel According to Thomas*, the so-called Apoca-



*Did the Apostle Thomas write a Gospel?*

lypses of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and of the Theotokos, the apocryphal books of Elias, Jeremiah and Enoch, the *Ascension of Esaias*, etc.

Many ancient iconographers and hymnographers presented scenes which had been handed down to us by tradition. These individuals did not take anything from the Apocrypha. Scattered in temples and monasteries, in portable icons and in frescos, and in countless manuscripts, dispersed throughout the whole Byzantine (Roman) Empire, the texts which recorded those events were, in fact, a genuine possession of the Church. The scenes they depicted are not recorded in the canonical books of the Holy Scriptures. The pious and the saints lived and experienced them. The so-called Apocryphal Gospels, the pseudo-gospels, simply “hijacked” these authentic events and assumed them for their own “tradition” and recorded, in a selective fashion, the things that belonged to the people of God, so that they might teach their own beliefs under the veil of gospel truth.

The Apocryphal books have been condemned by the Church because they contain blasphemies and heresies. It is forbidden to read the contents of the Apocrypha in Church, precisely because they have been written “for the deception and seduction of the simple.”<sup>1</sup> “They destroy the souls of them who do not know a great deal about the Faith and are guileless,” says St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and he adds with emphasis, “Do not read them.”<sup>2</sup>

But a certain misapprehension has developed here. The Church, in refuting the various heretical beliefs in the Apocryphal writings, does not, on the other hand, condemn the truths contained therein. That is to say, the Church does not forbid those things which the authors of the Apocrypha “stole” from Her, that is, known truths that have been incorporated into the pseudo-gospels; rather, the Church condemns the heresies which the pseudo-gospels preach.

From certain contemporaries, you sometimes hear an undiscerning generalization. They consider that the acceptable and upright things contained in the apocryphal books are of the same value as those things that should be rejected. The truth is thrown out together with the lie, or according to the proverb, “the baby is thrown out with the bath water.” They accuse the Orthodox of being “believers in the Apocrypha,” be-

*Homily on the Nativity of Christ*, in referring to the story of Joachim and Anna writes: “Let us see the new sight, how the Virgin exults in the birth, how the unwedded one suckles the infant. But first let us hear from those who record her history who she is and whence she came. Thus, I heard an apocryphal account [Ed. note: i.e., the *Protoevangelium of James*], adducing the narrative concerning her as follows: The father of the Virgin was prominent by his strict way of life according to the Law, and well known for great nobility, but he grew old in life childless, because his wife was not able to bear children....” [Translated by Elizabeth Dunlop]. St. Cyril of Alexandria: “For that which proceeds from the mouth of God is not to be wholly rejected just because those who do not know how to interpret correctly have laid hold of it; rather, since it is edifying, it should be a source of help and nourishment for you. For, by rightly interpreting the Faith, which is sometimes foolishly understood by [the heretics], not only are we *not* refuted by them, but rather we are all the more strengthened in overturning their heresy.” Migne PG 73, 13 BC.

11 “If we are able to extract something good from those outside, it is not forbidden. Let us become approved bankers, gathering the genuine and pure gold and discarding the counterfeit.” St. John of Damascus, Migne PG 94, 1177 B.

12 St. Athanasius the Great, *Festal Epistle* 39: “it is clear that ... they took them secretly.”

13 Eusebius, *Church History* (VI, 12, 6): “and we find many things in accordance with the true doctrine of the Saviour, but some things added to that doctrine, which we have pointed out for you farther on.”

Icon Credit  
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## Endnotes

1 See 60<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canon and its interpretation. The historian Eusebius relates that in consequence of the aforementioned *Gospel of St. Peter*, Christians of one community “fell into heterodox teachings,” *Church History* VI, 12, 2.

2 *Catechism* 4:35-36 (In Greek).

3 St. Photius the Great, *Greek Church Fathers* 3, 81-83.

4 St. Photius the Great, *Ibid.* p. 83.

5 *Apocalypse of Enoch* 1, 9.

6 St. Photius the Great, *Ibid.* p. 81-83.

7 *Greek Church Fathers* 10, 344-356: “This utterance of Mary is a demonstration of the things narrated obscurely.”

8 John Karmiris, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Records*, vol. 2, 1953, p. 825 (in Greek).

9 St. Photius the Great, *Amphilochia* 112, 113 / *Greek Church Fathers* 5, 431 (in Greek)

10 By mistake, virtually the whole work, *The Acts of John*, (*Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum* 1, *Acta Iohannis*, Brepols-Turnhot, 1983), has been inserted into recent *Synaxaria*, and also into the *Synaxarion* of St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. This legendary life of St. John the Evangelist has, however, been condemned in the 5th Act of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The Council ruled that “the entirety of this text is against the Gospel,” and it recommends that it should be consigned to the fire (*Acts, Labbe* 8, 1012 C-1013 E). In addition, St. Photius the Great says that “it is filled with foolishness,” “idle-chatter,” and is “the mother and well-spring of every heresy” (*Myriobiblos*, 114). It is, indeed, worthy of wonder how St. Nicodemus could have included this work in his *Synaxarion*, even though, in *The Rudder*, he writes the following about the Apocrypha: “Whosoever desires to publish these falsely-named books and to place them into churches to be read in the hearing of all as something sacred ... let him be deposed.” (Interpretation of the 60<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canon. In a footnote on the same Canon, the following exhortation may be found: “Be earnest in hindering the Christians from reading these impious books.”) St. Gregory of Nyssa,

cause they make use of some of the contents in the Apocrypha, which, in fact, originally belonged to the Orthodox Catholic Church.

Truths are not to be rejected simply because they have been inserted into the texts of the Apocrypha. It is the erroneous, blasphemous and heretical contents that must be rejected.

For example, in his epistles, the Apostle Paul often quotes texts which are found in the so-called apocryphal books ascribed to Moses, Jeremiah, and others. That apostolic phrase, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9) is found only in the so-called apocryphal writings attributed to the Prophet Elias, as St. Photius the Great points out.<sup>3</sup> St. Paul’s well-known phrase in his epistle to the Galatians, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (6:15) is found almost word for word, in the *Apocalypse of Moses*.<sup>4</sup> Is the Apostle of the nations, then, a believer in the Apocrypha?

Another of Christ’s disciples, one of the twelve, the Apostle Jude, in his epistle (14-15) quotes a written text that has been preserved only in the Apocryphal book of Enoch.<sup>5</sup> Also, from the epistle of the same Apostle, the passage where the Archangel Michael disputes with the devil (Jude 9), is found only in the *Apocalypse of Moses*.<sup>6</sup>

Is this Apostle also a believer in the apocryphal books?

It is not only the Apostles who quote the Apocrypha. An entire choir of Holy Fathers, such as St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, St. John of Damascus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory Palamas, St. George of Nicomedia, St. Cosmas of Aetolia and others, make reference to texts that, although they belong to the Tradition of the Church, have been preserved also in the Apocrypha, or only in the Apocrypha.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Homily on the Nativity of Christ*, relates “an apocryphal account” about the Theotokos, which, according to St. Gregory, is verified by the Theotokos’ own words.<sup>7</sup>

Who in his right mind would label the Holy Fathers as believers in the Apocrypha?

The Synod of 1722 uses an argument against the Roman Catholics

from the *Pseudo-Clementine writings*, which have been characterized as apocryphal.<sup>8</sup> As St. Photius the Great relates, the *Pseudo-Clementine writings* are filled with innumerable improprieties and unreserved blasphemy against the Son, in agreement with the heresy of Arius.<sup>9</sup> But the particular reference that the Synod of 1722 invokes is a reputable and well-known position of the Church, and the Synod makes correct use of it.

Who would be so audacious as to characterize the Fathers of the Synod, as believers in the Apocrypha?

Also, in the *Synaxarion* of the Saints, there are narrations that are found only in the Apocrypha, such as the narration about the Prophet Esaias and his death, being sawn asunder. Also, the prayer of Joachim and Anna in the garden, the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple, the birth of Christ in the cave, the scene of the washing of Christ, the Dormition of the Theotokos, the Apostles who are carried with clouds so that they might be present, prayer towards the east, temples that face towards the east, the teaching that the Theotokos remained ever-virgin and brought forth without travail, and so many other teachings and iconographic or theological themes, comprise an unbroken and ancient Tradition of the Church, even though they are not mentioned in the canonical books of the Church. It must be understood that whatever is found in the pseudo-writings and the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books is not a possession and copyright of their heretical authors; it is not by canon or definition condemned only because it is found there. It is not forbidden fruit for us. Rather it is a case of plagiarism by the heretics, because of their ancient custom of mingling “poison with honey.”<sup>10</sup>

We have the responsibility to discern the genuine from the counterfeit, to separate true gold from the cheap imitation, the wheat from the tares.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we should be careful to appropriate for ourselves what the heretics stole or seized in secret.<sup>12</sup> The criterion for distinguishing the truth from falsehood is the Holy Tradition of the Church. Bishop Serapion, who studied the heretical, so-called *Gospel of Peter*, says that the greater part of its contents were Orthodox; only a few points were to be rejected, which he pointed out for the faithful.<sup>13</sup>

Here is an example and proof from history that the Church always used what was true, and good and useful, no matter if it had been recorded by an enemy; the objectivity of the truth was the only prerequisite.

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (II Thessalonians 2:15).

